

97-84025-21

Jones, Leif

The nation's drink bill

Manchester

[1918]

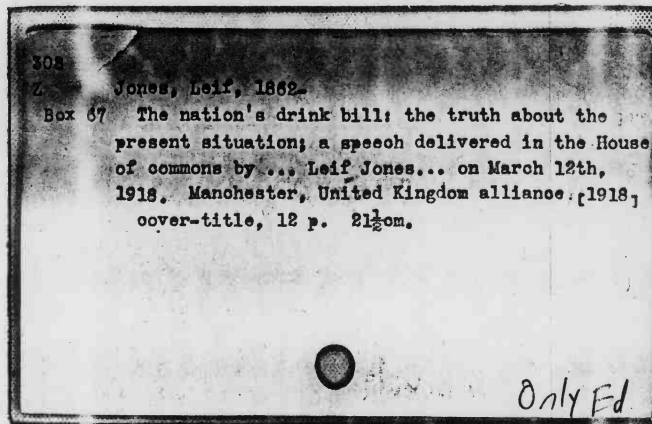
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THE
Nation's Drink Bill:

The Truth about the Present Situation.

A Speech delivered in the

HOUSE OF COMMONS

BY THE

Rt. Hon. LEIF JONES, M.P.,

On MARCH 12th, 1918.



PUBLISHED BY THE
UNITED KINGDOM ALLIANCE,
16, DEANSGATE, MANCHESTER.

WAR-TIME DRINK WASTE.

SPEAKING in the House of Commons on March 12th, Mr. Leif Jones said: By passing the Second Reading of the Consolidated Fund Bill the House will be granting the largest sum of money ever granted at any one time to any Government for any purpose, and in these circumstances it is legitimate that we should ask whether all the expenditure of the Government, is necessary expenditure and whether the best use is being made of the vast sums of money which the House is voting. But, in addition to asking that they shall spend wisely the money granted to them, we are entitled, seeing how great is the public expenditure, how great is the necessary expenditure, to ask the Government whether they are in every way cutting off unnecessary expenditure, both by themselves and by the people of this country. Are they in every way safeguarding the material resources of the people, so that they may stand the increasing strain that is being put upon them by the War? In that connection I want to draw attention to the expenditure of the country upon drink, and the burden entailed upon the nation by allowing this expenditure to continue during the War. In raising this subject, may I make an appeal to hon. Members? My views upon this question are very familiar, and a great many may think it quite unnecessary that I should deliver a speech about it. They may say that they know what I am going to say beforehand, and they have already made up their minds that they can deal fully with any of my arguments, and therefore they need not listen to them. I have seen it urged in the Press that those who support my view are accused of taking advantage of the War to further their own view. I was exceedingly sorry to see that the Secretary of the Ministry of Food, in the Debate on the Address, allowed himself to lend colour to that misrepresentation. I will read to the House the hon. Member's words, which, to me, seem very unfair, and I think it is unfortunate that he should have allowed himself to fall into them. He said:—

"The feeling of many working men is that the extreme teetotal element in this country stands in the same position as the representatives of the brewing and distilling interests, and they have availed themselves of the opportunity afforded by the war to urge their particular point of view."

2 March, 1920 - C.R.W.

The Government are not in the habit of giving their own sentiments, but they put these views into the mouths of the working men of this country.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Food (Mr. Clynes): My right hon. friend is quite wrong. If he reads my speech further he will find that I stated that I would not say in that case that the working men were right.

Mr. Leif Jones: The hon. gentleman gave currency to the thing by quoting that opinion. I wish to point out the difference between the two positions. By continuing the liquor trade the members of that trade are deriving great profits. What analogy is there between their position and that of a body of people, misguided if you like, who are advocating unpopular opinions from which they can get no personal advantage, and whose only motive can be that they wish to help the nation in a time of stress and burden such as never before has come upon us. What possible personal advantage does any Temperance reformer get out of advocating that opinion? My hon. friend opposite should have been more careful before he allowed himself to fall into saying something which I think should not have fallen from a Minister of the Crown in this House. We teetotalers are often accused of being prejudiced in our views. We have decided views, but the prejudice of a man who drinks alcohol is at least as strong as that of a man who does not. Therefore, I think I am justified in appealing to the House to put on one side pre-conceived opinions on this matter, and to treat as if they came from an impartial person the figures which I am going to present to the House as succinctly as I can.

FINANCE.

The drink trade as it is carried on now is too heavy a burden for this nation to bear during the War which taxes our resources and energies to the utmost. Let me take the financial aspect. The drink bill in 1914, the amount of money paid by the people of this country for the beer, wines, and spirits which they consume, was £164,000,000. Early in 1915 the present Prime Minister said:

"One of the things we cannot afford during the War is a drink bill of £160,000,000."

And yet in the year 1915 the drink bill was not £160,000,000, but £182,000,000. In 1916 it was £204,000,000, and I am sorry to have to tell the House what the drink bill for 1917, in spite of all the appeals for economy from the Chancellor of the Exchequer and members of the Government, and after all the Government have done to restrict the sale, the drink bill for 1917 is £259,000,000 at least, and will probably be nearer £270,000,000 if you take into account the value of duty-paid

stocks of spirits scattered throughout the country which we have no proper means of estimating. Along with that, the Government are getting less out of it owing to the decline in standard barrelage and in the quantities of proof-spirit issued from bond. In 1915 the country derived from taxation upon drink £60,000,000, out of a drink bill of £182,000,000, or 33 per cent. In 1916, with a drink bill of £204,000,000, the taxation derived was only £54,000,000, or 26½ per cent. In 1917, with a drink bill of £259,000,000, the taxation is only £35,000,000, or 13½ per cent. So that the proportion paid in direct taxation by "the Trade" has dwindled from £60,000,000 in 1915 to £54,000,000 in 1916, and to £35,000,000 in 1917. It is true that these figures have to be corrected by the amount taken in excess profits from the brewery companies and distillers, all of whom have been making very largely increased profits. But the Chancellor knows as well as anybody that the excess profits taxation does not raise anything like the same amount as direct taxation put on before the profits are made, and he knows how excess profits are reduced by extravagant expenditure and the fact that a good deal of this money has been made safe against taxation. Since the War began £750,000,000 has been spent on drink, and out of that sum I do not think that the Government have got £200,000,000, even with these excess profits. I hope the Chancellor of the Exchequer will give us the figures on the Budget, for he has something to explain in the remission of taxation he made in his Budget of 1917, when he thought it necessary to remit to the brewers £1,000,000 in Licence Duties. More than £500,000,000 out of £750,000,000 is dead-weight expenditure during the War. Seeing what the call for money is, and seeing the demand for saving that is put forward, I say that is too much money for this country to spend upon what is at best a luxury.

SHIPPING.

The financial aspect is not the strongest aspect of this question. I turn to the question of shipping of the material out of which the drink is made. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was accused in the debate on Thursday of having made a somewhat gloomy speech to the House. I do not complain that the speech which the Leader of the House made was gloomy; on the contrary, I should like to thank him for his speech, for he did, in much greater measure than the Government had hitherto done, endeavour to tell the truth to the House and the country about the shipping situation and other matters. The only complaint that I make is that in his talk about shipping, and in the debate about shipping, last week, the Government were still too optimistic. The country does not

yet realise how grave is the situation. I do not know, but I suspect that the Germans are building U-boats quite as fast as the Admiralty are sinking them. He would be a very unwise man who thought that the submarine menace was going to be overcome at any early date. Our ships are being sunk weekly in great numbers. The First Lord of the Admiralty tells us that the curves of sinking are going steadily down, but so are the ships every week. The shipbuilding programme is hopelessly in arrear. I am not going to apportion the blame, but the result is that the ships are not being built, and we are not getting the output. It is hopelessly in arrear.

The Government realised this at the end of last year, and, as we were told by the Shipping Controller at a meeting upstairs, they caused to be prepared an indent of the necessary imports. They cut down everything to the absolute essentials for munitions and for the food of the people, and when they had reached the limit with regard to food and munitions, there was practically nothing left for carrying on all the industries of the country. The Government, as they say, have left out everything unnecessary. They have cut out foreign products, and all items that are not regarded as essential foods, and they have left only sixteen classes of essential foods. Yet I find, among those sixteen classes of essential foods, that cereals for brewing are included. I want to know what justification the Government have for using 600,000 tons of our depleted shipping for the purpose of importing cereals for brewing? I want to know whether they have revised their programme, and whether they have determined that there shall be no more cereals imported for the brewers' use until the bread of the people is safe? I know the figures, though I am not at liberty to give them, and I say that if the House and the country knew the figures as I know them they would not allow another ton of shipping to be used for the importation of brewers' materials until the situation was amended.

FOOD.

I turn to the food position. The Government had warning with regard to the food position. A committee of the Royal Society sat during 1916 and reported at the end of 1916. In their Report they said that the margin of food in this country was a small one, being no more than 5 per cent above what was necessary, and even that small margin at that time, twelve months ago, was so unequally distributed that some people were below the safety margin. The Report stated that if you went below the 5 per cent margin the health of the work-people would suffer seriously. They urged various ways of saving food and of using it for the best available purpose, and

they showed that the greatest saving was to take the food used for brewing and distilling and use it for direct human consumption. The Government thought that they knew better. They were impressed a little, and they said that they were going to cut down the beer to 10,000,000 barrels. They did not do so. They permitted more to be brewed in the summer because it was hot, and more in the winter because it was cold, and in the end the standard barrels numbered 16,500,000, the bulk barrels reaching 21,000,000. The Government were urged, and they did make an effort, to increase the wheat reserve. They did reach a very much larger reserve than we had had before. Where is that reserve now? What does it stand at? I ask the Government again, are they going to take the country into their confidence? I know the figures, and if the country knew them as I know them, they would not allow another quarter of barley to be used for brewing beer until the bread situation was better. During 1917 the Government allowed 600,000 tons of barley and 65,000 tons of sugar to be used. We were asked by the Food Controller to save 180,000,000 4-lb. loaves. The brewers used up the equivalent of 268,000,000 4-lb. loaves, and 240,000 tons of offal. Poultry must be cut down, and men must no longer give barley to pigs. You are punishing men for feeding pigs with barley, but you have permitted brewers to use barley for making beer.

DISTILLING.

The amount of grain used in 1916-17 for distilling purposes was 370,000 tons. The estimate for 1917-18 is 270,000 tons. As far as I can ascertain, there is still in stock a store of 135,000,000 gallons of spirits. Are the Government going to use those spirits for munition purposes? They can use them. They refused to use them before because they said it was a more expensive process, but there is no process so expensive as starving the people. It is time that they turned to this store of spirits and used it for all the War purposes for which it can be used.

The estimate of the Government of the amount of wheat from North America to be imported into this country was 7,500,000 tons. Month by month they have made an estimate of the amount that would come. Two months have passed. They did not get their amount in January, and they did not get it in February. They know that they have had to recast their estimate for March, April, and May. I say to them that by 1st June the stores of grain in this country will be at a lower level than they have been in any recent year.

The Government which last year was asked to make a store of food for the people, and which saw what was coming in

view of shipping difficulties, have much to answer for in having allowed our stores of wheat and cereals to be used up, and at the same time in allowing this further waste to go on in brewing and distilling. I do not know whether they will tell us that the mischief is done, and that the barley is all malted, and therefore it is not much use meddling with it now. I can assure them that malted barley is very good and very nourishing food. It is also an excellent feeding stuff. There would be no difficulty, if they compelled brewers to give up the hoarded barley and the hoarded sugar, in using it for much better purposes. The Government are prosecuting members of this House for having hoarded stores of food—too much bread and too much sugar. Why should brewers be allowed to hoard large quantities of grain and sugar? We are entitled to an answer to that question. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Food told us to-day that they had not yet decided about rations of bread. He hoped there might not be bread rations, but he had them in contemplation, and all was ready. Has he taken into account the number of men who, in addition to the bread ration, may drink beer or spirits? The one condition of successful rationing is that we shall all be treated alike. Rich and poor, teetotallers and non-teetotallers, we are entitled to fair and equal treatment when it comes to apportioning the limited quantity of breadstuffs. We are told that one gallon of beer uses up about $2\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. of barley or 2 lbs. of bread. Now I am informed that two pints a day is a reasonable amount to be consumed by a beer drinker, so that the man who drinks two pints a day consumes what would be his wife's ration of bread. Have the Government, in the rationing scheme, taken into account the amount of bread and foodstuff destroyed in the making of beer?

TRANSPORT.

Let me turn to another aspect of the question. My figures will stand examination, and I ask hon. members to examine them. They may not support my deductions, but the figures are there. I take the question of transport by rail, horse and petrol. That is a very serious matter at the present time, as the Government know. The carrying on of the drink trade of this country during 1917 has involved the carrying about the country of 600,000 tons of barley—much of it handled several times; from 60,000 to 65,000 tons of sugar, 21,000,000 barrels of beer full, and the same number of barrels empty, with all that they require in the way of handling. I have worked these figures out in trucks and trainloads. I find that the number of trucks required for 600,000 tons of barley is

75,000, while 65,000 tons of sugar take 13,000 trucks; 21,000,000 barrels of beer occupy 800,000 trucks; indeed, they occupy them twice, first when full, and then when empty, that is twice 800,000 trucks. Then there is 600,000 tons of coal which is used up in brewing, which represents another 60,000 trucks. That gives us a total of 1,748,000 trucks. Adding the figures for wines and spirits, you have altogether more than 1,800,000 truck loads of material to be carried up and down the country during the year. That represents 45,000 trains of 40 trucks each, or 120 trains a day for every day of the week throughout the year; that is to say, the transport by horse, rail or petrol is equivalent to 120 trains running every day throughout the year. That is a very serious burden upon the transport of this country which, as the Government know well, is getting into a most serious condition.

THE LABOUR ASPECT.

I turn to the labour dealing with this drink trade. I find that the drink trade employs in the making and distribution of drink 150,000 men. They are not very many of them old men. There is a reservoir of labour which I recommend to the attention of the Government, because most of these men—I may say practically all of them—might be set free for employment in the different occupations in which the Government now require men immediately. There is another aspect of the labour question. There are not only the men employed in making and distributing the drink; there are the men employed in looking after the results of drinking in this country, which is not at all a small matter. There is the Control Board itself. You have one of the ablest Departments of the Government engaged in doing nothing else but trying to prevent the liquor traffic injuring the country during the War. You have an army of people, the police and officials, who have to look after it. There is yet another aspect of the labour question, that is, the effect of the consumption of this liquor upon the efficiency of the consumer. That is a point which the Government has sedulously avoided. The Committee of the Royal Society reported that the alcohol consumed was practically of no benefit to the output of labour in this country. They declared that repeated experience had shown that regiments not supplied with alcohol were in better condition at the end of the day than those to which it had been given. That was the view of the Committee of the Royal Society. The Government took no notice of it. The Control Board, however, appointed a committee of doctors to investigate the same subject and to make a pronouncement as to the effect of alcohol upon the human frame. I venture to read to the House some of the

conclusions published in their Report, which has been issued by the Control Board. It contains the findings of this very able committee of doctors upon this question of the action of alcohol. They say that alcohol is not truly stimulant, but that

"It is from first to last a narcotic drug." (Page 35.)

I want to draw the attention of the Government to the effects produced by the consumption of alcohol, because I see in this list not only physical effects, but also political effects produced by alcohol. I would ask the House to note how in the political sphere, as well as in the physical region, alcohol produces its effects. They may be summed up briefly as follows—I am reading the exact words from the book—

"First, uncritical self-satisfaction of the subject with his own performances."

I need not point the moral of that.

"Secondly, disregard of occurrences and conditions normally evoking caution of act and word."

Could anything be more characteristic of the attitude of the Government during the past twelve months?

"Trespass of rules and conventions previously respected; impaired appreciation of the passage of time; loquacity and an argumentative frame of mind."

What is the effect upon the workman attributed to drink by these doctors? This is their general view, that it tends to destroy in a workman accuracy, caution, tact, discipline, punctuality, discretion.

I ask any employer of labour or any workman to put these scientific findings together and ask what is likely to be the effect of the continued consumption of alcohol upon the output and efficiency of industrial labour? It is because the industrial side of the question is so important that the Prohibition movement has assumed such great proportions in the United States of America. I do not think I need labour the case further. It was said in Debate more than a year ago that the case for Prohibition during the War was logically irresistible, and certainly the Government have not put forward any answer to it. They told us then, and they have told us again to-day, that the British workman must have his beer, and that, if he does not have it, then he will not do his work. I see members of the Labour party present. They might properly resent the imputation that, if it were shown to them to be necessary that they should do without their beer, they would then refuse to work unless they got it. I know, of course, that many workmen appreciate their beer. I do not approach this question only from the point of view of the

workman, because I know there are other classes who like their wine and spirits, just as the workman likes his beer. It is not a class question at all. What I am saying about manual work applies with even more force to professional work of various kinds and brain work of all kinds, because alcohol first of all attacks the higher functions of the nervous system. If it is a question between bread and beer, I do not believe that any workman in this country would hesitate. The Government have told us that if it came to be a question between bread and beer, that they would not hesitate. Then I ask them whether the time has not come for them to make up their minds? I suggest to the Government that they have themselves encouraged this labour unrest. I will read a circular which was issued from the Munitions Department in July last. They represented in this House that there was a spontaneous outcry from the workers because there was not sufficient beer for the country. There was very little complaint. They had a Commission on industrial unrest which, in certain parts of the country, found that there had been complaints, but on the whole found that far more important questions were agitating the minds of the workmen than the question of the supply of intoxicants. This is the circular they sent out addressed to the heads of controlled firms:—

MINISTRY OF MUNITIONS.
(Private and Confidential.)

DEAR SIRS.—The Ministry of Munitions have been requested by the Food Controller to ascertain whether the increase in the distribution of beer of 20 per cent, which was recently authorised, has satisfied the workers in the factories in this area."

That invites the answer which no doubt the Government got. If they really wished to ascertain the opinion of the workers of this country, they should not issue leading questions to them. They should put the food situation and the shipping situation before them and ask them, with full knowledge of the facts, to give a vote, one way or the other, whether they will have the beer, which involves risk to the bread, or whether they would rather that their families had the bread and they went without the beer. In a great measure the protest has been an engineered protest. I am going to read a circular which has been issued from a district in the North of England. It was sent out to trade unions, and is signed by the chairman and secretary of a beer, spirit, and wine trades association:—

"HYDE AND DISTRICT BEER, SPIRIT, AND WINE TRADES ASSOCIATION.

We are instructed to ask you to be good enough to try and get your society to pass the following resolution (in own words) as early as possible and forward to the Food Controller, Palace Chambers, Westminster: the Minister of Munitions, Whitehall; the Prime Minister, Downing

Street; the Right Hon. G. N. Barnes, M.P., Westminster; the Right Hon. Bonar Law, M.P., Westminster; and to the local members of Parliament."

This is the resolution:—

"The members of this trade union (or friendly society), numbering — members, desire to protest strongly against the continued restrictions on the output of beer as being entirely unnecessary and causing a vast amount of discontent among the workers, whose only desire is to do the very best they can for their country to help to win the War. They hope the Government will accede to the legitimate and moderate wishes of the working classes of this country, and grant, without delay, an adequate supply of beer. If this is done, the action of the Government will be very much appreciated."

I am very much afraid the Government has interpreted the engineered resolutions of the liquor trade as expressing the genuine opinion of the working men of this country. So far as they have been tested by genuine votes in Scotland in working-class constituencies, the voters have declared that they are in favour of Prohibition during the War. They know well the result. If the Government wants to get the genuine opinion of the workers, let them state the position: let them ask the workers to make a sacrifice in the interests of their country. They have asked greater sacrifices of them than changing their habits for the period of the War. All our habits are changed. All sacrifices have to be asked for. Alone the Government seems to shrink from asking this one sacrifice, which they know would immensely strengthen the forces of this country in many directions.

AMERICA AND CANADA.

The Government is dependent, and we are dependent, more and more, in the War upon America and Canada, and the help which they can send us. I wish our Government would lead in the way that some American statesmen are leading. I wish they would bring the same thought and the same utterances to bear upon the War that American statesmen are bringing. The Americans are tackling this question in a very different way from that in which our Government is dealing with it, and they are speaking in a very different way. Mr. Roosevelt, who is not a sentimentalist, who, as far as I know, is no teetotaler, who is certainly keen to win the War, uses this language, which I commend to the Government:—

"The world is facing a shortage of food. Soon we, in this country, shall face a shortage of food. Therefore, let us use all the grain we have for food, and not for intoxicants. Now that the War is on, let us forbid any grain of corn being used in the manufacture of intoxicating liquors."

The Americans are sending us their grain. How long do you think they will go on being short of bread in order that we may brew the grain? They are getting very uneasy, and

the Government knows it well, so much so that it has tried to prevent America from knowing what is going on in this country. We have had speakers from America in this country. They have written home of the condition of things which they found in regard to drink in this country. Their letters have been censored, and the parts relating to the drink traffic have been struck out in black in order that America might not know how this country is dealing with the problem. It was an idle attempt. The very men who wrote the letters are themselves back in America now, telling the people what they have seen. Instead of blotting out evidence and refusing to face the facts, the Government should deal with them as the Americans are dealing with them.

I turn to Canada. The women of Canada, who are all voters now, are petitioning their Government to stop the sending of grain to this country until we cease to use it in manufacturing intoxicants. They are going on two days a week without fire in Canada—two heatless days—because they want the railways free to carry grain to the people of this country. Do you think the Canadians are going without fire in winter in order that brewing and distilling may go on in this country? They are having two wheatless days in Canada in order that they may send more grain to this country. Do you think they are going short of bread in order that people here may drink beer made from the grain that they forego? The Government must face this question as the Government of Canada has faced it, and if they face it they will decide in the same way—the only way. The Government of Canada, said Sir William Hearst, have taken up Prohibition in order that they may not follow, as he said, the situation in the Old Land. This is what the Prime Minister of Ontario said:—

“The situation in the Old Land to-day speaks to us in this new land in tones of thunder to avoid the path that land has taken, and to shake off that which hampers progress in peace and may destroy entirely in war.”

That is worthy language, but it is not pleasant language, I should imagine, for the Government of this country to hear. I ask the Government to reconsider this matter. They must be conscious that they are losing ground daily. I will tell them why. Confidence begets confidence. The Government choose to govern without consulting the House or the country. The Government do not trust the people, and the people do not trust them. I ask the Government to face the facts, to state the facts, and to ask of the people the sacrifice that the facts demand. The spirit of the nation is high and unbroken and of unwavering determination. If the Government rely upon it, it will not fail them.

**END OF
TITLE**